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SUBJECT: YOUTH AND POLITICS IN LITHUANIA: READY AND ABLE,  
BUT NOT WILLING

¶1. Summary. We discussed politics with 140 university and college students in groups of 15 to 25. Students support more liberal economic policies and their views of politics are similar to those in many countries: disappointment with politics, politicians, and political parties; concern about the influence of money; and a desire for change. Most students (75 percent) said they will vote in parliamentary elections in October and an overwhelming majority stated that there should be more young people in politics. However, only one of the 140 students said he would consider entering politics. End summary.

#### Economic and educational concerns

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¶2. We visited seven colleges and universities around the country and discussed politics and economics with students during the last months of 2007. Regarding economics, students were most concerned about increasing salaries, liberalizing the business environment and reducing impediments to entrepreneurs, particularly difficulties in receiving loans. Students were also concerned about the increasing costs of higher education, recognition of Lithuanian degrees abroad, support for international exchange programs, and the quality of teachers, particularly at the high school level.

#### Concerned about politics, but passive

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¶3. Many students were cynical about politics and politicians. As one respondent said, "economics is politics in Lithuania." Most students felt that corruption was widespread and that people enter politics for personal gain. Students complained of a lack of "political morality," but expressed a willingness to tolerate corruption (which they viewed as inevitable) if the politicians at the same time do work that benefits the community.

¶4. Many students complained of the prevalence of former Communist party members and the lack of young people in politics. Several students suggested that it will take thirty years to cleanse Lithuanian politics of former Soviet officials and move to real democracy. (Note: Students' views that true democracy has not yet been achieved are shared by others. A recent poll in the weekly news magazine Veidas, showed that only 15 percent of respondents believed that the president and parliament govern Lithuania, while 41 percent thought that non-transparent clans and groups control government rather than democratically elected officials.)

¶5. Many students were aware of troubling tendencies in Lithuanian politics. Students noted the influence of Lithuanian "oligarchs" in politics, the sale and purchase of media coverage not marked as advertising, politicians hopping from party to party for personal rather than ideological reasons, and the cults of personality that often trump party

platforms. To illustrate the limits of ideology and party platforms, one respondent noted, "in Lithuania, it is often the loudest person in the room who is considered right."

¶16. Many students expressed support for (relatively) young politicians, such as the leader of the Liberal and Center Union party, Arturas Zuokas, and the mayor of Kaunas, Andrius Kupcinskas. Three-quarters of the students we spoke with said they will vote in the October parliamentary elections and an even greater majority said that there should be more youth in politics. However, only one out of 140 students said that he would consider entering politics himself.

COMMENT

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¶17. University students in Lithuania understand many of the problems with politics in Lithuania, but are not willing to address these problems directly by entering politics. Many feel that corruption and personality-led party politics are too entrenched to be beaten in the short term. As one student commented, "new buildings and new infrastructure will not solve the problem; we need to build a new attitude." This view is, unfortunately, based on some genuine shortcomings with democracy in Lithuania. However, resignation and inaction will only allow the shortcomings to continue and perhaps to strengthen. We will continue to interact with youth, civil society groups, and the media to encourage people to rise to the challenges of democracy.

LEADER